

Croatia & Slovenia – Spring in Istria

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Trieste; transfer San Stefano.

Day 2/7 Excursions around Istria from San Stefano.

Day 8 Fly London.

Departs

May

Focus

Birds, flowers, butterflies and all round natural history

Grading

A/B. Easy to moderate day walks

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code HRV03) or current brochure

Highlights:

- Single-centre tour based in a comfortable hotel in the attractive valley of the River Mirna, Croatia
- Grey-headed, White-backed & Black Woodpeckers, plus Ural Owl possible
- Adriatic Lizard, Monkey and Bee Orchids amongst other orchids
- Golden Oriole, Wryneck, Tawny Pipits, European Bee-eaters and Hoopoe all possible
- Eat at local 'konoba' (or 'trattoria') & try the area's acclaimed truffles & local wild asparagus!
- Adriatic Lizard, Monkey and Bee Orchids amongst others
- Botanise on the Premanutra Peninsula
- Led by expert naturalist guides



Images from top: Black-headed Bunting, Hairy Cistus, Roman Amphitheatre at Pula



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Introduction

Lying just to the south of Trieste in Italy, the triangular peninsula of Istria projects into the warm waters of the Adriatic Sea. Split between Croatia and Slovenia, this delightfully unspoilt region of the Mediterranean brims with historical charm and boasts a rich natural history as well as an acclaimed cuisine. During this single centre holiday we will be based in the far north of Croatian Istria, from where we will explore the region's diverse habitats, from the dry Mediterranean grasslands of the Premantura Peninsula to the subalpine meadows and cool Beech woodlands of the Ćićarija Mountains and Dinaric Alps. Although Istria covers only 15% of Croatia's surface area, it is home to nearly 50% of its higher plants! This rich biodiversity extends across the board to its birds, butterflies and other wildlife and, once the region's interesting archaeology and delicious food are added to the mix, it becomes evident that Istria offers the perfect blend of natural history, landscapes, culture and cuisine for a fascinating and enjoyable week.



Adriatic Lizard Orchid (Domen Stanic)

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Trieste, transfer San Stefano

We begin our holiday with a flight from London Stansted to the historic city of Trieste in Italy. Next, we continue by road, first across the border into Slovenia and then into Croatia. Our base for the week is San Stefano, a comfortable and modern hotel forming part of an older thermal spa, tucked away in the attractive valley of the River Mirna in northern Istria. The nearby medieval city of Buzet is widely known as the 'City of Truffles', as the surrounding woodlands not only yield excellent birdlife, such as Golden Oriole, Wryneck and Hawfinch, but are rich in this sought-after delicacy too. During our stay at San Stefano we will dine out each evening at a local 'konoba', where the acclaimed truffles and local wild asparagus are sure to feature on the menu!

Day 2

San Stefano

Today we will explore our surroundings on foot from our hotel, examining the karst limestone areas behind the hotel, the grounds themselves and the woodlands along the River Mirna, famous for their truffles. The karst rock-faces and small quarry to the rear of our hotel are home to nesting Alpine Swifts, Blue Rock Thrushes and Black Redstarts, while the Mediterranean scrub of *Phillyrea latifolia* and Bay (*Laurus nobilis*) holds Sardinian and Subalpine Warblers, Nightingales and Cirl

Buntings. Peregrines nest on the rock face close by, often seen in conflict with the local Ravens! The botanists amongst the group will not have to go far to enjoy their first orchids, for the nearby golf course is home to Adriatic Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum adriaticum*), Monkey Orchid (*Orchis simia*) and Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*). We have specifically asked the gardeners to leave this area uncut until after our group have visited! Meadow Clary (*Salvia pratensis*), Erect Clematis (*Clematis recta*), and Twayblade (*Neottia ovata*), can all be found in the karstic woodland edge, together with Sword-leaved Helleborine (*Cephalanthera longifolia*). The creamier-coloured White Helleborine (*C. damasonium*) flowers slightly later, but depending on the season but may be out by the time we arrive.

Day 3

North-western Istria

This morning we will start our day's excursions with a short stop near the village of Butari, to visit a superb wildflower meadow where we are likely to find Bog and Green-winged Orchids (*Orchis palustris* and *O. morio*) and Adderstongue Fern (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*). We should also have time to visit the famous medieval church of Hrastovlje, just over the border into Slovenia, world-famous for its medieval frescoes including a superb 'Dance of Death', which features what is almost certainly a Bald Ibis!



Hrastovlje medieval church

Moving further into Slovenia, we will next head towards the coast, stopping off at Škocjanski zatok, a DOPPS wetland nature reserve (DOPPS being the Slovenia Birdlife partner). The brackish lagoon and freshwater marsh are rich in birdlife, with plenty of herons and egrets, Pygmy Cormorants, Common and Little Terns. This is an excellent spot to look for migrants in the spring, and we should be on the lookout for the likes of Purple Heron, Black Stork, Black Tern, Spoonbill, Bee-eater, Hoopoe and possibly Little Crake.



European Bee-eater

Travelling back into Croatia, we visit the very north-western tip of Istria at Savudrija. We should enjoy stunning views looking onto the Bay of Piran and the Gulf of Trieste, and also the opportunity to examine the extraordinary stratigraphy of the karst limestone and fossils, the geological processes evident here spanning millions of year. Here, the climate is decidedly Mediterranean, with nesting Tawny Pipits, Bee-eaters and occasional Olivaceous Warblers. There are plenty of butterflies too in the grasslands at this time of year, including a wide

range of blues and lots of Glanville Fritillaries. Finally, our journey from the sea back to the hotel takes us along the valley of the River Mirna. The valley is full of birds, especially Black-headed Buntings and Melodious Warblers, and Short-toed Eagles often hunt snakes in this area. There are also summering European Rollers, Lesser Kestrels and Red-rumped Swallows most years, as well as the resident Spanish Sparrows.

Day 4

Punta Premantura

Today is a day for the botanists, though by no means lacking in birds, as we drive south the length of Istria (which takes a little over an hour) to the southern tip of the peninsula. This area is famous amongst botanists throughout central Europe for the presence of many steno- ('strictly') Mediterranean species. Surrounded by the Adriatic, temperatures here rarely fall below freezing and the flora is magnificent, with more than two dozen species of orchid flowering during the course of the year. During our visit we hope to find fine examples of Pink Butterfly Orchid (*Orchis papilionacea*) and several *Ophrys* species, such as *O. bertolonii*, *O. bombiflora* and *O. incubacea*. In damp years, there are magnificent displays of Sage-leaved Cistus (*Cistus salvifolius*), Montpellier Cistus (*C. monspeliensis*) and Hairy Cistus (*C. incanus*), together with other colourful and aromatic flora typical of Mediterranean scrub and woodland.

Several interesting bird species are present in the scrub and grassland, including Tawny Pipits, Bee-eaters, Subalpine and Sardinian Warblers, Cirl and Corn Buntings, and we should have superb views of Pallid Swifts as they come and go from their nest-sites in the caves close to the southern tip of the peninsula. Notable butterfly species in this area include the Cleopatra, a close relative of the Brimstone, and the Osiris Blue.



Ophrys incubacea (Kerrie Porteous)

On our return journey north we will make a short stop in Istria's 'capital', Pula. This picturesque little city is home to one of the largest surviving Roman amphitheatres, which would have held 20,000 spectators in its heyday, and we'll have a little time to explore before we return to San Stefano.

Day 5

High Plateau above San Stefano

Some of the most beautiful parts of Istria are very close to our hotel, although well off the beaten track on the high plateau above us. Road travel will be minimal today, as we take time to enjoy an in depth exploration of the area close to our base. This area above our hotel is a mixture of limestone and sandstone, with low intensity agriculture and scrubby grasslands. There are disused quarries where Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting are common, as well farmland species such as Turtle Dove, now so rare in the UK. Overhead, raptors including Short-toed Eagle, Honey Buzzard and Goshawk are all possible.

The isolated villages here conserve magnificent vernacular architecture together with splendid ancient landscapes of butterfly and flower rich meadows. Here the mixed geology yields a mixed flora, and there are plenty of orchids to be enjoyed including Lady (*Orchis purpurea*), Military (*O. militaris*) and Monkey Orchid (*O. simia*) (plus plenty of hybrids between them!), along with Long Lipped Serapias (*Serapias vomeracea*) and Late Spider Orchid (*Ophrys fuciflora*).

Although early in the year, there is a good chance of the trio of Glanville, Spotted and Heath Fritillaries as well as Marsh Fritillaries, Swallowtails and numerous blues. A visit to a *polje*, a marshy depression in the karst, should yield some Summer Snowflake (*Leucojum aestivum*) as well as amphibians such as Yellow-bellied Toad and Italian Crested Newt.

Day 6

Lake Cerknica, Slovenia

Today we travel back into Slovenia, to Inner Carniola (Notranjska) to visit the superb karstic Lake Cerknica and the limestone gorge of Rakov Škocjan. Lake Cerknica has been designated an 'Important Bird Area', covering 3000 hectares of open water, reed-beds, damp meadows and low-intensity agriculture. This is an area of incredible biodiversity, and the surrounding damp meadows are not only home to Corncrake and Red-backed Shrike, but filled with orchids, scabious and other wild flowers, together with numerous butterflies and Fire-bellied Salamander. Migrant Red-footed Falcons and Montagu's Harriers may also be spotted around the lake here, together with commoner birds such as Whinchat, Scarlet Rosefinches and Barred Warblers.



Red-footed Falcons (Domen Stanic)

We spend the rest of our day today exploring Rakov Škocjan, a limestone gorge carved by the River Reka which drains the lake, set in extensive Beech and Fir forests overlooking the lake. These wild forests are home to Brown Bears, Wolves and Lynx, all extremely rarely seen, though we may spot signs of the Bears' recent activities. Rather, we will be on the lookout for the many woodpeckers that live here, including Three-toed, Grey-headed and Black Woodpecker, together with Crossbills, Willow Tits and Firecrests.

Day 7

Ćićarija (Inner Istria)

The Ćićarija Plateau is the fascinating upland area of Inner Istria and the Dinaric Alps, with mountains rising to 1400 metres above sea level. This attractive region of northern Istria is clothed in Beech forest and topped with subalpine meadows. Long winters and wet summers here lead to a seemingly strange assembly of flora and fauna so close to the Mediterranean, with a strong Arctic-Alpine flavour.

The woodlands on the lower slopes are home to Grey-headed and Black Woodpeckers, plus the magnificent Ural Owl, whilst above the tree-line we can look for Golden and Short-toed Eagles, Rock Partridge, Hoopoe and Ortolan Bunting. Splendid flower-rich meadows, both dry and damp, and acidic and alkaline, are also a feature of today's sites. The superb subalpine grasslands are home to a wide range of grassland orchids, Wild Narcissus, Carnic Lily and Common Asphodel, together other dry grassland species. The Beech woodlands, meanwhile, have a rich ground flora that continues well into June, and includes Blue-eyed Mary, Haquetia, woodland orchids such as Lady Orchids that may reach half a metre in height, various hellebores and a wide range of showy bittercresses (*Cardamine sp.*).



Monkey Orchid (Mark Galliot)

After a full final day in the field, we will return to San Stefano for our final evening and a last taste of Istria at our local *trattoria*.

Day 8

Transfer Trieste, fly London

Our flight from Trieste to London Stansted usually departs in the late afternoon, giving us plenty of time to enjoy a little Italian birding on the Adriatic coastline to conclude our holiday. Isola della Cona, at the mouth of the river Isonzo, lies around 12km to the south of Trieste airport. This nature reserve covers a huge area of wetlands, mudflats and shallow seas, and boasts a bird list of 325 species, the longest of any single European reserve! May is the peak time for passage waders, but Bee-eaters will have returned by now too, taking up their colony in front of the hide. We will also spend time enjoying the many herons and egrets, Spoonbills, Glossy Ibis and Pygmy Cormorants, before we must make our way back to the airport in Trieste in time to check-in for our flight home.

Tour grading

Grade A/B – Easy to moderate day walks. We travel by minibus most days, but will spend plenty of the time exploring on foot, expecting to cover between about 3 and 8km on a typical day. Please note that some of the trails can be narrow, steep and rocky on occasion. In particular, the path up to the quarry behind the hotel begins with a steep ascent (around 10 minutes walking). Enjoyment of this tour, therefore, demands a reasonable level of fitness and an enjoyment of walking. All walks will be taken at a leisurely 'botanical' pace, and a built-in flexibility will take account of the overall abilities of the group.

Focus

This is an all-round natural history holiday, focusing on the outstanding flora, birdlife and fantastic scenery of the area. We will also enjoy the rich diversity of butterflies and other fauna, as well as a little of the local culture and cuisine.

Food & Accommodation Included in the Price

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this tour. We will be staying at San Stefano, a modern addition to the older Istarske Toplice thermal resort, close to Buzet in Istria. All the rooms have en-suite bathrooms, hairdryers and Wi-Fi. The hotel, catering for thermal springs visitors, also has a gym along with several swimming pools and saunas. We usually enjoy picnic lunches in the field each day, and in the evenings we will eat in a local *konoba* (trattoria), in order to make the most of the region's acclaimed cuisine.

Weather

At this time of year, the weather should be sunny and warm with occasional showers, and daytime temperatures typically ranging from 15 to 25°C. That said, the weather in Istria varies enormously from place to place and a rain-shadow means heavy rain inland in the mountains often corresponds with bright sunshine on the west coast. We will take advantage of this should it prove necessary!

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Croatia and Slovenia. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website.

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